

# **Learning And Inclusion For Disadvantaged Youth**

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## **Abstract**

**Key Words:** School-family-community links, Rural and urban schooling

## **General Description**

More people are pursuing asylum than at any time since World War II (Gurria, 2016). Migration flow inevitably impacts schools with children enrolled in contexts where their home language is not the spoken language used at the school (Muller, 2015). In addition, many children are impoverished and have experienced trauma thereby requiring targeted support to cope with daily life (Armstrong, Armstrong & Spandagou, 2011). Schools require knowledge on how to support children to cope, and communities require knowledge on how to welcome and include families from diverse cultural backgrounds ensuring equitable learning opportunity (Ballard, 2016).

In 2015, approximately 244 million people were residing in OECD countries beyond their country of birth (Gurria, 2016). In such circumstances, publicly funded schools are presumed to ensure equity of access and learning opportunities for all children (Ballard, 2016). In practice, this is far more complex, as there are differing ideas, opinions and beliefs on what this means, and how this could and should occur. Leaders, teachers, children, and parents have to be encouraged to embrace a shared philosophy of inclusion and engage in practices that promote equity.

The inclusion of all students in regular schools is an international movement (Rouse & Florian, 2012; UNESCO, 2009). Creating an inclusive school that respects diversity (Menter & Hulme,

2012) and caters for the needs of all children is a complex challenge (UNESCO, 2005). The term inclusion originally focused on the inclusion of students with specific disabilities or learning difficulties (Gause, 2011) but now means catering for the needs of all children, including those who are refugees, live in poverty, have mental health issues or have experienced trauma (Cole, 2015). Inclusion and exclusion are interrelated processes apparent in every day practice and their interplay constantly creates new possibilities (Armstrong, Armstrong & Spandagou, 2011). Both terms have differing definitions and this paper seeks to capture some of tensions involved in the struggle that schools face regarding how to include or exclude and when, what, and how. So what does this mean for schools who strive to reduce the socio-educative exclusion affecting disadvantaged children?

The main question this study sought to answer was: what do stakeholders see as the key strategies/processes within each school that support inclusion, especially for students from diverse cultural backgrounds?

An answer to this question has been derived from the effective inclusive practices within six Australian school contexts where communities report that inclusion is more than words, and National Benchmarking Results show high or improving achievement standards.

This project builds on both prior (Abawi, Carter, Andrews, & Conway, in print) and current research seeking to create a broader understanding of effective inclusion practices for all students. Data has been collected over a three year period from four public primary (elementary) schools and two large secondary schools in Queensland, Australia. While the context of the study is Australia, the relevance of the findings is international. In one school half of its 760 student enrolments have English as Another Language or Dialect (EALD), of which a large proportion are refugees. To add to the complexity, predominately half of this cohort changes every two years as families move on to establish new lives. The other schools have varying levels of migrant and refugee enrolments and all schools have significant Australia Indigenous populations, as well as students with disabilities or other special learning needs.

A model/approach documented from earlier research is further developed and refined to detail shared support structures and ways of working proven to support inclusion. This paper illustrates the refined model in action with examples from these schools which actively reduce the socio-educative exclusion affecting disadvantaged children.

## Methodology

A phenomenological case study approach was used with the phenomenon being *inclusive practices supporting all students*. This method seeks to “identify and describe before trying to analyse and theorize” (Chadderton & Torrence, 2011, p. 53). It is uniquely fashioned to allow researchers to investigate human experience and behaviour (Husserl, 1962) to understand local realities (Buber, 1970). Through the visiting and revisiting of themes and messages from personal experiences, the essence of a phenomenon emerges within context.

This study draws on the lived experiences of teachers, school leaders, external stakeholders, students and their parents. The overarching question - *what school actions underpin inclusion, particularly for disadvantaged students from diverse cultural backgrounds?* - was answered by exploring the following sub-questions: a) how do these strategies/processes compare with findings from previous research?; b) what internal (i.e., school based) and external (i.e., community based) factors promote inclusion?; and c) what are the implications of these findings?

The researchers worked with different schools before bringing the data together. Various forms of data collection were utilised: focus groups, semi-structured interviews and document analysis. All group and individual interviews were recorded, transcribed and presented back to participants for confirmation of intent. Interpreters were used if needed.

The questions and ways of working with students were formulated in partnership with staff who knew the ability levels, backgrounds and behavioural characteristics of their students. Adjustments were made to the delivery of the questions to suit the needs of the students e.g. pictures to better represent ideas and responses through drawing. Parental permissions were obtained and all ethics processes adhered to.

Analysis of the data was undertaken at a number of levels. The first of these was a scan and documentation of initial impressions viewed in connection with researcher field notes. This helped to ensure that both researchers were aligned in their thinking and aware of each school's specific context. Transcripts were coded and themes extracted. These themes were written into school lived experiences illustrated with participant quotes and presented back to participants for comment and confirmation of intent.

With the school stories complete it was then possible to uncover the essence of the phenomenon and answer the research questions. In light of the findings, the model developed from earlier

research was refined to become a reflective tool for schools and education systems seeking to ‘include’ all children, in the hope that socio-educative disadvantage is not a life sentence.

### **Findings/Outcomes/Conclusion**

Findings reiterated well-known themes such as the positive impact of family involvement on the academic, social and emotional development of disadvantaged students. More controversially, they also revealed how exclusive elements can be used to support equity, overcome social problems and achieve good educational results for students.

The preliminary results of the research show that students were included on the basis of their level of individual need and not in relation to a specified disability, cultural background or experience. Teams worked together with data to determine the specific nature of a student's need. Observation, family/school meetings and even home visits developed understandings and relationships that built solid grounds for student support. A team of people, specialists, support teachers, community volunteers and family members worked with classroom teachers to achieve long-term goals through short term achievements and celebrations. Mistakes were made and acknowledged, becoming the fertile ground for reflection and future planning.

Leaders emphasised the need to provide ongoing professional learning and admitted that this need was for themselves as well, as they searched for ways to help children with issues they had not previously dealt with. Educating student peers and the parent community was also high on the agenda with school websites and newsletters used to educate by sharing insights, celebrating cultural diversity and showcasing student achievements. Leaders spoke of the moral imperative to include and that personal stories drove them on their mission for inclusion, rather than policies or system expectations. An enabling culture was created by reinforcing at every opportunity the need for inclusion and how this might be achieved. Staff and community were consciously and actively brought together to create a vision for the future with collectively developed and well-articulated school wide pedagogical practices (Andrews & Abawi, 2017) reinforcing this intent.

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